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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000054

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM I2

SUBJECT: FORMER NAJAF GOVERNOR ON AL-SADR, IRANIAN INFLUENCE

REF: A) HILLAH 0046 B) HILLAH 0010

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alfred Fonteneau, RC, REO Al Hillah, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (S) SUMMARY: Former Najaf Governor and head of the Loyalty to An Najaf party Adnan Al Zurfi believes Muqtada Al-Sadr wishes to avoid armed confrontation with coalition forces, but is finding it difficult to keep Madhi Army militia under his direct control. Sadr, Zurfi commented, is listening to Sistani and working to purge radical, unpredictable lieutenants from the Najaf Mahdi militia. By doing so, he hopes to minimize chances of an out-of-control incident that could give the Americans an excuse to attack the Jaysh al-Mahdi. Zurfi warned that JAM militia in Najaf are stockpiling mortars and may have recently received anti-tank missiles from Iran (NFI). He described Iranian influence in Najaf as deep, but limited. While Iranian intelligence is embedded in many layers of Najaf government, there has been little Iranian commercial investment. Consequently, many Najaf citizens remain skeptical of Iranian intentions and would strongly prefer a continued U.S. presence. Zurfi described a massive Iranian public relations campaign in which up to three hundred Najaf business owners, bureaucrats, teachers, and intellectuals, men and women, are sent on an all-expenses paid trip to Tehran. Despite the inducements, Zurfi said, many Najaf citizens return unconvinced. Zurfi also updated REO Hillah staff on his brother's kidnapping case, and again called for financial support of his party and related organizations (reftel B). END SUMMARY

¶12. (S) Adnan Al Zurfi came to REO Al Hillah to pass along documents related to his brother's kidnapping, and the arrest of one of his aides. He said he intended to go to Baghdad in the near future to meet with the FBI and pass along a dossier on his brother's case to PM Ibrahim Jafari.

¶13. (S) Zurfi portrayed himself as a hunted man, continually under attack by Najaf Governor Assad Al Taee and Deputy Governor Hassan. He stated that he believed Hassan is holding his brother, Hussein, based on calls made from Hussein's cell phone that appeared to originate from government buildings, prisons, and houses known to belong to Hassan. Zurfi described Governor Al Taee as more aggressive than DG Hassan. He downplayed reports of enmity between the two, noting they were moving in the same direction. Al Taee, he said, had warned Zurfi's long-standing provincial government and Iraqi police contacts that they would be fired if they were seen with Zurfi. "Trumped-up" charges of corruption during Zurfi's tenure as governor, brought by the Governor, had been dismissed in Baghdad, Zurfi added.

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Iran: Often thanks, but no thanks  
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¶4. (S) "Najaf belongs to the Iranians," Zurfi said. He stated that the Governor had told him it was nothing personal, but as long as Zurfi, a U.S. national, was seen by the Iranians as someone who could rally anti-Iranian sentiment, the prosecution would continue. Zurfi urged the United States to pay more attention to Zurfi's political allies, the sheikhs of major tribes, such as the Al-Ghazali in Najaf province. Those sheiks, Zurfi said, saw no commercial advantage in dealing with Iranians and preferred the status quo, preferably with plenty of U.S. largesse. Comment: However, tribal-based politicians have performed poorly in local elections, with SCIRI and Dawa capturing most votes. End Comment

¶5. (S) Zurfi claimed that the governor swings all municipal contracts to Iranian-connected business owners. However, his power is checked somewhat by Ayatollah Sistani's disinclination to interact either with the governor or the Iranians. Sistani, Zurfi noted, meets infrequently at best with Governor Al Taee.

¶6. (S) Zurfi characterized Iranian influence as deep, but limited. The Iranians work through "their man", Deputy Governor Hassan, but also control most intelligence functions in the province. Zurfi noted that this is a important reason why Iranian public relations often fails to capture hearts and minds; the blatant exercise of power by local intelligence personnel cuts too close to the excesses of the Saddam era for most local residents. Teachers, former Baathists, clerks believe they could be dismissed at any time for no reason. As an aside, Zurfi commented, many intelligence operatives from the Saddam days are back in action and manipulating Sadr militia units, or alternatively influencing Sadrist through relatives embedded in the militias. They have just swapped green shirts for black, Zurfi concluded. Zurfi also claimed that in the past two months, the price of weapons has surged in the Najaf area as

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JAM members stock up. They are particularly interested in mortars and have received anti-tank missiles from Iran, Zurfi asserted.

¶7. (S) Zurfi contrasted Iranian pull in the Najaf provincial bureaucracy with their limited commercial clout. Many Najaf businessmen would prefer dealing with the Americans who at least bring aid dollars to the table, Zurfi said. To counter this, Zurfi claimed that the Iranians are giving out all-expenses-paid tours to Teheran on a grand scale. Up to three hundred local residents a month from all works of life are bused or flown to Iran. The particularly influential are sometimes taken to meet Ayatollah Khata or Rafsanjani

¶8. (S) Zurfi asserted that the Governor of Qom Province had recently secretly traveled to Najaf during Arba'een, staying in a small house adjacent to the main shrine for Hussein. He related how an acquaintance had had business dealings with a relatively high-profile Iranian intelligence agent "Hammad" who made it a point to seek out Iraqi businessmen and offer them Iranian imports at close to or below cost ("Hammad" had allegedly worked in the Sudan during the Eighties). The Iranians, Zurfi claimed, were also assisting SCIRI in gradually removing police chiefs one by one around the region, replacing them with SCIRI members. In these small ways, Zurfi stressed, the Iranians steadily accumulated influence.

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Muqtada Al-Sadr: A Fearful Moderate?  
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¶9. (S) Zurfi claimed that Al-Sadr had met with Ayatollah Ali Sistani one-on-one just days before, in a two hour meeting. Sadr "knows what is going on," Zurfi says, and does not hesitate to demonstrate his willingness to cooperate with Sistani. Zurfi

characterized Al-Sadr as wanting to stay engaged in the political process. Accordingly, Zurfi commented, Al-Sadr is fearful that uncontrollable elements of the JAM will jeopardize his political gains by provoking the Americans into attacking and crushing the militia. Therefore, in Najaf, Al-Sadr is sending away more radical members of his entourage and turning over militia groups to more reliable or at least predictable lieutenants. He noted that after a recent Badr-instigated attack on his compound, Al-Sadr's first reaction was to restrain militia members who had rushed to the scene, encouraging them to stay calm. Zurfi commented that Sadr's support is not as monolithic as commonly portrayed in the media. The Americans, Zurfi commented, should attempt to reach out to older, "simple" Sadr members who have automatically, but at best only half-heartedly, transferred their allegiance to the son.

Comment: Reftel A reports on a meeting between Al-Sadr and Sistani. Zurfi may or may not be referring to the same meeting. His account of the meeting differs substantially from reftel.

End Comment

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Zurfi's perilous place

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¶10. (S) As per reftel B, Zurfi continues to emphasize that his party and other secular parties in Najaf (including the Communist Party) are losing ground as supporters abandon hope that they can influence events. He stated that he himself is only staying in Najaf because of the disappearance of his brother. He also asked for U.S. intervention in the trial of a former assistant who has been transferred to Babil Province to face multiple charges of murder and extortion. Zurfi claims that the charges are based on a confession extracted by torture.

Comment: Regardless of the validity of Zurfi's accusation, there have been repeated accounts of human rights abuses by the defendant End Comment

¶11. (S) Zurfi said his finances are dwindling and he has yet to receive the salary he is entitled to as an ex-governor. Still, he commented, he remains politically active, most recently organizing a teen sports and culture association as an alternative to joining the militias. He optimistically commented that while many of his supporters may have gone underground, they yearn for leaders who can deliver normalcy, and not rely on partisan religion for their base of support.

FONTENEAU